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Source: *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 44, No. 102 (Jan., 1966), pp. 36-50

Published by: the [Modern Humanities Research Association](#) and [University College London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4205710>

Accessed: 10/06/2014 12:31

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Shakespeare and the Slavs*

O. VOČADLO

'SHAKESPEARE is a dramatic giant, unique in his way, a new powerful phenomenon, something of a miracle, unexhausted, inexhaustible, like human life which is mirrored in him, a whole world in itself...' This tribute to the uniqueness of Shakespeare's all-inclusive mind appeared in an article on Racine by Karel B. Štorch, a learned Prague editor, published in the 'Journal of the Bohemian Museum' in 1858.¹ Štorch was familiar with Shakespeare's plays almost all of which were then available in translation. It was an historic occasion. When the article was written a glorious Shakespeare season was in progress at the old National Theatre² during which no less than seven tragedies and two comedies were performed. Their immediate success effected a revolution in taste which was later described by V. Hálek.³ After that the cult of Shakespeare firmly established itself in the heart of the Prague public, reaching its zenith in the magnificent tercentenary celebrations of 1864, and it has remained so established ever since. Štorch's tribute to Shakespeare's genius calls another to mind. Writing to a friend shortly before his visit to Bohemia in 1839, N. V. Gogol praised the English poet in similar terms. He maintained that 'the deep and bright Shakespeare reflects in himself as in a faithful mirror all the vast world and all that composes man'.

The miracle of Shakespeare's greatness is indeed in his universality: the amazing range and variety of his panorama of mankind. His penetrating insight into human nature, much admired by Purkyně, the famous physiologist, extends from masterly portrayal of individual characters to acute observation of man in the mass in which he equally anticipated modern psychology. Apart from court

* A lecture delivered at the University of Cambridge on 12 October 1964. It appears here in slightly abridged form.

¹ *Casopis českého musea*, XXXII, 1, Prague, p. 76. Štorch (also known by his pen-name Boleslav Klatovský) was on the Museum Publication Committee known as *Matice Česká*, presided over by J. E. Purkyně, when it decided in 1854 to publish the first Slavonic metrical translation of all Shakespeare's dramas. The committee included P. J. Šafařík, the author of *Slavonic Antiquities*, W. W. Tomek, the historian of the city of Prague, and K. J. Erben, poet and folklorist, whose collection of Slavonic fairy tales was put into English by Sir W. W. Strickland, translator of Hálek. On the scholarly team who undertook the ambitious task see my article 'Shakespeare and Bohemia' (*Shakespeare Survey*, IX, Cambridge 1956, p. 103) and my introduction to the first complete Czech edition of Shakespeare's works, trs. J. V. Sládek, Prague, 1959-64, I, pp. 32-9.

² This theatre was dedicated *Patriae et Musis* by Count Nostitz in 1783, a hundred years before the opening of the present National Theatre to which it is now affiliated. It will always be associated with Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and with J. K. Tyl, whose name it bears and whose verse translation of *King Lear* was produced there in 1835.

³ In the literary periodical *Český obzor literární*, Prague, 20 March 1868. See my article 'Shakespeare Cult in this Country' (*Czechoslovak Life*, Prague, 1964, XIX, p. 25.)

circles he created lifelike groups of 'rude mechanicals' and peasants, burgesses and soldiers, fickle mobs, and even—in the Jack Cade scenes—a parody of a communist coup. Students of racial characteristics may note a gallery of fascinating types in Shakespeare. In the first place, the challenging figures of Shylock and Othello. Most of us have, perhaps, formed our first idea of antique Romans from *Julius Caesar*. On a smaller scale there are interesting sketches of various European nationalities. The inhabitants of the British Isles, true-born Englishmen, a Welshman, a Scot and an Irishman are nicely differentiated in *Henry V* which also gives us some specimens of the French élite. In *Romeo and Juliet* Pushkin has singled out Mercutio as the perfect type of a Renaissance Italian. The fantastic Don Armado in *Love's Labour's Lost*, as well as the cunning Iago and perhaps also the amorous Roderigo in *Othello*, may be seen as presenting different facets of the Spanish character, coloured—like the boastful Frenchmen—with the current national prejudice for the benefit of the patriotic audience. As for the Germans, they do not seem to have been Shakespeare's favourites. Professor Brandl complains—not without reason—that Shakespeare has by no means treated them with particular consideration. They are represented as hopeless drunkards and the proverbial Teutonic honesty is ridiculed without the usual good-natured laugh in 'the three Cozen-Jermans' in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. As regards alcohol consumption, other Germanic peoples—Danes, Dutchmen, Flemings—are not spared either. Toppers are held up to ridicule and drunken orgies are mercilessly condemned.

I

How are the Slavs, the third important ethnic group of Europe, represented in Shakespeare's dramas? Let us first briefly consider what was known to the Elizabethans about Slavonic nations. In Shakespeare's time there were three independent Slavonic states. Foremost among them was the kingdom of Bohemia with its incorporated provinces of Moravia, Silesia and Lusatia. It was the leading country of the multi-national Holy Roman Empire which included, besides the German-speaking territories, parts of Italy, the Netherlands and a piece of France. Shakespeare's contemporary John Speed in his description of the most famous parts of the world puts Bohemia before France. Its capital and the imperial court of Rudolf II attracted many a distinguished English visitor: Sir Philip Sidney, Sir Arthur Throckmorton, Dr John Dee—the learned mathematician, cartographer and alchemist patronised by the Emperor himself—and others. Dee's famous disciple Sir Edward Kelly resided in Prague with his devoted stepdaughter, the celebrated

Latin poetess Elizabeth Weston (Vestonia), until his downfall. In turn, several Bohemian barons—the cultured Žerotín, his cousin Slavata, as well as his young protégé Brtnický—were graciously received at Queen Elizabeth's court. Though land-locked Bohemia, unlike the other Slavonic countries, was not accessible by sea, there were common bonds, religious and also dynastic, which favoured friendly relations between the two peoples. For Protestant England whose liberties were likewise threatened by the Habsburgs, Bohemia was above all the country of John Hus and Jerome of Prague, pioneers of the Reformation, and of John Žižka, the famous Hussite general. Their history was familiar to the assiduous readers of Foxe's popular *Book of Martyrs* of which the author—or co-author—of *Henry VIII* was one. Besides, two readable, though biased, histories of Bohemia were available in Latin: that of Enea Silvio (Pope Pius II) and of Dubravius, bishop of Olomouc, an authority on fishes and fishing. His latinised name was as well known as that of Goslicius, bishop of Poznań, author of 'The Counsellor'.

Goślicki's Polonian Empire was brought into close contact with Britain through Baltic trade. Thousands of British merchants settled on the Polish coast during the 17th century and the number of Scottish pedlars in Poland seems to have been a stock joke of Shakespeare's time.⁴ Comenius' Scottish friend Durie was Minister to the Company of English Merchants at Elbing. Their mutual friend Hartlib had a Polish father and his mother was daughter of an English merchant at Gdańsk. Of Polish magnates the Palatine Laski, another patron of Dr Dee, enjoyed a certain reputation in England, and Zdeněk Brtnický met Count Leszczyński in London in June 1600. The Polish constitution, especially the elections and the veto, was notorious. Poles were also noted for their religious toleration, which however did not extend to their orthodox Russian subjects. Since the union with Lithuania Polish kings ruled over the whole of western Russia, the present Ukraine and White Russia. Poland was then more powerful than her eastern neighbour and after Boris Godunov's death interfered in Russian internal affairs.

Regular trade contacts between England and Russia were set up by the Muscovy Company, the first of the great joint-stock companies, in 1555, after the discovery by Richard Chancellor in 1553 of the northern way to the Dwina estuary, the same route which so many heroic English convoys followed during the last war battling with the cruel sea. Sir Hugh Willoughby's voyage in search of the north-eastern passage to the far east was a tragic failure. The way

⁴ Flaminee in Webster's *White Devil* speaks of 'the list of forty thousand pedlars in Poland'. According to O. Halecki commercial relations brought 15,000 English to Gdańsk under Sigismund III; see his 'Anglo-Polish Relations in the Past' (*The Slavonic and East European Review*, XII, 36, 1934, p. 659).

to Cathay was blocked by ice. But Chancellor, the experienced chief pilot of the expedition, landing in the White Sea where later (1584) Archangelsk was built, explored the northern way to Moscow for western trade.⁵ That event put an end to the isolation of Russia and opened up an important channel of Anglo-Russian intercourse which still increased during Boris Godunov's regency, though English trade monopoly was later restricted. Contemporary accounts of English travellers in Russia in the second half of the 16th century are of great historical interest, especially the *Relacion* of Sir Jerome Horsey, an agent of the Company, who spent seventeen years in the country, and *Of the Russe Commonwealth* by his successor, Giles Fletcher, Fellow of King's College, Cambridge, who was sent as envoy to Moscow in 1588.⁶ In Elizabethan times the English were more interested in Russia and knew more about it than any other European people.⁷

There is still another Slav country or rather a symbol of a country which Shakespeare put on the map long before it was to be born in the fullness of time. Illyria was since the 15th century synonymous with Sclavonia, the territory of the southern Slavs, but the dramatist was hardly aware of contemporary ethnographic realities in placing there his most delightful comedy. The divided Jugoslavs were not so well known as their northern cousins, having no independent state of their own. It was not till much later that the formidable Croat warriors in the Austrian army attracted attention in the west with their neckwear, the flying cravats, christened after their wearers. And the Serbs who were not living under Habsburg rule were almost completely submerged in the Ottoman Empire. The name was probably suggested to the poet by Caesar's ancient Illyricum, situated on the eastern coast of the Adriatic, once the domain of Shakespeare's 'Bargulus, the strong Illyrian pirate', mentioned in *Henry VI* (Cicero's 'Bardylis, Illyrius latro'). Another 'notorious pirate', Ragozin⁸ in *Measure for Measure*, reminds one of Ragusa or Dubrovnik which was included in Napoleon's Illyrie in 1809, the

⁵ In Eisenstein's remarkable film 'Ivan the Terrible', when the news comes to Moscow of the arrival of the daring English merchant adventurers, the delighted tsar exclaims: 'They have outflanked the Germans!' ('Oboshli nemtsev!'). The quasi-colonial character of the profitable Russian trade is discussed in T. S. Willan's *Early History of the Russia Company, 1553-1603*, Manchester, 1956.

⁶ Fletcher the Elder was the father of the two allegorical poets Phineas and Giles and uncle of John Fletcher, the dramatist.

⁷ Elizabethan views of Russia are conveniently summed up by K. H. Ruffmann in his book *Das Russlandbild im England Shakespeares*, Göttingen, 1952. There is no lack of books on the early contacts between the two countries either in English or in Russian. Soviet writers sometimes object to the term 'discovery' in connection with Chancellor's voyage, most emphatically N. T. Nakashidze in his outline of Anglo-Russian relations in the second half of the 16th century, *Russko-angliyskiye otnosheniya vo vtoroy polovine XVI. v.*, Tbilisi, 1955.

⁸ The name, reminiscent of Dostoyevsky, may be a corruption of the Magyar Rákóczy, the scene of Shakespeare's source being Hungary.

first step on the road to Yugoslav unification. Shakespeare's Illyria became the rallying cry of Croat and Slovene patriots till 'illyrism' was suppressed by the Austrian government. Thus by a stretch of imagination we might visualise the action of *Twelfth Night* somewhere on the Dalmatian coast, preferably at the ancient port of Dubrovnik with her proud argosies and Feste singing his melancholy songs to the accompaniment of a gusle to please his love-sick *gosparknez*.⁹

II

In a detailed examination of Slavonic allusions in Shakespeare's work three plays especially claim our attention: *Love's Labour's Lost* on account of the Russian masquerade, *Hamlet* for its connection with the Polish wars, and last but not least *The Winter's Tale*, five scenes of which are laid in 'fair Bohemia'. But other suggestive references to Slavs are found in other plays as well, particularly in *All's Well that Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*.

In the reign of Queen Elizabeth I Russia was regarded as an exotic country with her fur-clad picturesque embassies and strange manners described by Giles Fletcher in his book *Of the Russe Commonwealth* (1591), dedicated to the Queen. In *Love's Labour's Lost* the term Muscovite is identified with Russian. The king of Navarre and his three companions, 'a mess of Russians' as the French princess calls them, dress up in Russian habits. Boyet informs the ladies that the king and his courtiers will shortly appear 'apparel'd . . . like Muscovites or Russians', or, as the flippant Rosaline later puts it when they plan to snub their suitors, 'disguis'd like Muscovites in shapeless gear'.¹⁰ The king and his courtiers were apparently arrayed in fur-trimmed cloaks, fur hats and boots of Russia leather, in conformity with the proverbial severity of the Russian climate, and they are mockingly dismissed by the princess with the words 'Twenty adieus, my frozen Muscovites'. This Russian mask, as well as the revels arranged about the same time by the lawyers of Gray's Inn parading the ambassador of the 'mighty czar of Russia and Muscovy', show that Russian missions to the London court made a great stir in the city. This was due no doubt chiefly to their picturesque attire. But there is evidence that their language too aroused

⁹ In *Shakespeare Quarterly*, New York, spring 1958, L. Salinger suggested that Illyria may be Epidamnum of the Menaechmi. It is mentioned in *The Comedy of Errors*. Old Epidamnos is Dyrrhachium, the present Durres. Albania was included in ancient Illyria. Caesar's province corresponds to Dalmatia and Istria.

¹⁰ Cf. J. W. Draper, 'Shakespeare and Muscovy' (*The Slavonic and East European Review*, XXXIII, 80, 1954). The average Russian type as depicted by Fletcher is not unlike Oblomov: 'unwieldy and inactive' and 'of a large size and of very fleshy bodies', etc.; it would not be surprising if he had been somewhat biased in view of the harsh treatment he had received.

considerable interest and even admiration in high places. We learn from Sir Jerome Horsey who returned from his Russian travels in 1587 that the Queen herself was interested in the Russian language and script and asked Essex to learn 'the famoust and most copious language in the world', which he tried to do. Why was Elizabeth so impressed by it? In her youth she had studied Greek with Roger Ascham, the former Greek Reader at St John's and a favourite pupil of Sir John Cheke, Provost of King's College, the foremost Greek scholar of the day. The Queen was probably reminded of Greek by the rich inflections of Russian. The obvious resemblance of the ornamental Cyrillic script to the Greek alphabet may also have appealed to her imagination. Russian is generally appreciated by students of Greek¹¹; Horsey has recorded her confident statement that she could quickly learn it.

What was Shakespeare's idea of Russian? I believe it can be gathered from the episode of the showing up of Parolles in *All's Well that Ends Well*, IV, i and iii, where a pseudo-Russian regiment is introduced. Soldiers who capture Parolles and blindfold him pretend to talk a lingo which he takes to be Russian. 'The manifold linguist', as he is called here, knows several Teutonic and Latin languages, but being ignorant of the language of Moscow he feels quite helpless:

I know you are the Muskos' regiment;
And I shall lose my life for want of language:
If there be here German, or Dane, low Dutch,
Italian or French, let him speak to me. . . .

The specimens of the bogus language concocted by the poet for the purpose sound, I am afraid, more like Esperanto than Russian:

Manka revania dulce.—Oscorbi dulchos volivorco.
—Boskos vauvado . . . (etc.)

Shakespeare, who had a quick musical ear, was apparently struck by the full vocalic endings which Slavonic has in common with Romance languages and he also noticed the frequency of the *ch* (ѣ) sound. The ending *-o* possibly represents in some cases final *-u*, and *-os* the reflexive form of the verb. The enigmatic exclamation 'cargo', that occurs repeatedly in this rigmarole and is met elsewhere, sounds Spanish, but might here represent the Russian *karga* which means hag or harridan. But surely disgruntled ambassadors would hardly dare to talk so disrespectfully about court ladies even among themselves! The word 'vauvado' is reminiscent of Fletcher's

¹¹ Prosper Mérimée thought Russian the most beautiful language of Europe, Greek not excepted, and that eminent Grecian Miss Jane Harrison confessed in her memoirs that it laid a spell upon her. She found the vagaries of the Russian verb particularly attractive.

'voiovod' (general). However, there is at least one unmistakably Russian expression here: 'oscorbi'. The initial group of sounds *osk-* is not found in English, nor for that matter in Latin or Germanic languages.¹² *Oskorbiť* is a common Russian verb meaning to insult. It should not be difficult to explain why Shakespeare remembered this particular word so clearly. An incident might easily be imagined that he himself witnessed at court or in the street in his capacity as Groom of the Chamber or perhaps even at the Globe theatre. Some touchy Russian delegate may have taken offence at the behaviour of the gaping crowd, an onlooker's gesture or a laugh, and we can imagine him yelling at the top of his voice: *Oskorbili!* (I have been insulted!).¹³ The situation would have been sufficiently dramatic to stick in the poet's memory.

Has Shakespeare incorporated in his vast vocabulary any new Russian words? Perhaps only 'steppe' in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II, i, but it is doubtful whether the Quarto reading 'the furthest steppe of India' is correct. If we accept it leaving aside the objection that there are no steppes in India, Shakespeare would be the first to use the word in English. The Folio editions have 'steep' which some scholars prefer. It might refer to the lofty Himalayas. The form 'step' in the meaning of utmost limit has also been suggested. The title *tsar* which Ivan the Terrible adopted and which was known in England ever since the Muscovy Company was founded does not occur in Shakespeare's works. Instead in both *Measure for Measure* and *The Winter's Tale* we hear about 'the Emperor of Russia'. In this, however, Shakespeare apparently follows his sources.¹⁴

English travellers in Russia mention *kvas*—*quasse* in Fletcher's transcription—which we meet in Heywood but not in Shakespeare. Talking of Russian food Fletcher enumerates different kinds of fish, 'very good and delicate'. He does not forget the flavoursome fish product 'icary or caveary'. The latter international term supplied Hamlet with his oft-quoted phrase 'caviare to the general', i.e. a dainty dish not suited to everybody's palate.

Bears were among the commodities exported from Muscovy together with the invaluable ropes and spars for the rigging of the

¹² I can only think of the Latin diminutive *osculum*. It does occur in Irish, e.g. in *oscaillt* (opening), but here is pronounced *osg-*.

¹³ Fletcher's book (*op. cit.*) was quickly suppressed because of its critical attitude. The Muscovy Company feared it might give offence and damage their trade interests. On Russian susceptibilities cf. G. Turberville's poem beginning 'I write not all I know' quoted by Hakluyt (*The Principall Navigations*, etc., III, London, 1600).

¹⁴ Mr Salinger has kindly drawn my attention to S. M. Nutt's interesting article 'The Arctic Voyages of William Barents in Probable Relation to Certain of Shakespeare's Plays' published in *Studies in Philology*, XXXIX, Chapel Hill, N. C. The author suggests that the poet derived some of his ideas about Russia from G. de Veer's description of Barents' voyage to Novaya Zemlya which appeared in Latin in 1598 and in English in 1609. But I think Fletcher and Hakluyt sufficient for his needs.

navy which scattered the Spanish Armada. 'The rugged Russian bear' is named by Macbeth (III, iv) as the first of the three most terrifying sights together with the 'armed rhinoceros, or the Hyrcan tiger'. In another well-known passage Macbeth compares himself to a bear tied to a stake (V, vii). One more allusion to bear-baiting occurs in *Henry V*. English mastiffs were greatly admired for their courage in the bear-garden. But Charles d'Orléans, the French poet who was taken prisoner at Agincourt and spent twenty-five years in English captivity, has only contempt for them—as for their masters. 'Foolish curs', he calls them (III, vii), 'that run winking into the mouth of a Russian bear, and have their heads crushed like rotten apples!'

III

In the eyes of the Elizabethans Russia had one feature in common with Poland: long, dark, extremely cold winters with dreary, interminable nights. Angelo (*Measure for Measure*, II, i), impatient of the clown's twaddle, declares: 'This will last out a night in Russia when nights are longest there'. Similarly Dromio of Syracuse (*The Comedy of Errors*, III, ii) describes the greasy kitchen-wench to Antipolus in these words: 'I warrant, her rags, and the tallow in them, will burn a Poland winter'.

Two forms denote in Shakespeare the inhabitants of Poland: 'Pole' and 'Polack'. They are used alternatively as the metre requires. An example may be quoted from the scene in *Hamlet*, IV, iv, which remains an eternal indictment of the futility of all wars of conquest.¹⁵ Hamlet questions the Norwegian captain about the Polish expedition, 'the Polack wars' as Horatio calls it at the end of the play. The captain's answer ends in these words:

Nor will it yield to Norway, or the Pole,
A ranker rate, should it be sold in fee.

To which Hamlet replies:

Why, then the Polack never will defend it.

The form with the Slavonic ending *-ak* is used twice in the second act, once in the fourth act and as an adjective in the fifth. But its occurrence in the first act is disputed. This leads us to the famous crux 'the sledded Polacks' (*Hamlet*, I, i). At the beginning of the play Horatio comments on the ghost's stern countenance as follows:

So frown'd he once, when, in an angry parle,
He smote the sledded Polacks on the ice.

¹⁵ Hamlet's ironical comment on 'the question of this straw' is echoed in the impressive ant scene of the *Insect Play* by the brothers Capek.

The spelling of the first three Quartos and the first two Folio editions is here 'pollax' and 'Pollax' respectively. Opinions are divided among Polish scholars and English Shakespearians, too, as to whether a pole-axe is meant or Poles, the name of the people. 'Sledded' might mean either fixed onto a sledge or else driving or seated on sledges. Sir E. K. Chambers, G. B. Harrison and on the Polish side Professor W. Tarnawski and the editor of his translations Professor S. Helsztyński favour the battle-axe in spite of the definite article. The Vikings used what is called in the Saxon Chronicle 'taper-æx' (A.D. 1031).¹⁶ English 'pole-axe' denotes an axe mounted on a staff, a sort of tomahawk, resembling perhaps the *čakan* of the Chods, the Bohemian frontier guards, or *valaška* of the Slovak shepherds and robbers. 'Sledded' might also be connected with 'sledge hammer'. Thus it would mean a long-handled axe with a hammer at the back. The emendation 'leaded' has also been suggested, implying a heavy weapon. This would indeed be a truly Shakespearian picture: the Viking seized with berserk rage during a quarrel, snatching his or perhaps his opponent's axe and flinging it with full force on the ice. On the other hand there is something to be said also for the other interpretation. The idea of sledges and ice goes well with the Elizabethan notion of a Polish winter. The meeting might have taken place somewhere on the frontier formed by a frozen stream. The Danes and Poles were neighbours on the Baltic (in western Pomerania) in the old days; for a time Poland was forced to pay a tax like the English (Danegeld) to buy the pirates off and there were clashes between them. In this case angry negotiations ended in a battle in which the Poles were defeated by Prince Hamlet's father. Both interpretations could be defended. Sampson, the editor of Webster's tragedies, suggested 'shaved' Pollacks for 'sledded'. We find indeed 'shaved Polack' in *The White Devil*, meaning 'Ukrainian Cossack' in east Poland.¹⁷ But such a compositor's error is not graphically plausible.

There is still another puzzle in *Hamlet* which belongs under this heading. It concerns the Danskers, mentioned by Polonius (II, i, 7) in his instructions to Reynaldo. Polonius himself, if we take his name as a clue to his identity, might be of Polish origin. Shakespeare, like Hamlet, disliked and ridiculed courtiers, representing them as fatuous busybodies. But there is something of the proverbial Polish

¹⁶ 'The Slavonic Element in English' (*Časopis pro moderní filologii*, XXVI, 1, Prague, 1939, pp. 94-5) by the present writer.

¹⁷ Ukrainian Cossacks shaved their heads leaving a lock of hair (*khokhol*) on the crown. Hence the nickname Khokhol. F. L. Lucas in his excellent new edition of *The White Devil* (London, 1958) quotes Morison's *Itinerary* on Webster's 'shav'd Pollake': 'The Polonians shave all their heads close, excepting the haire of the forehead which they nourish very long and cast back to the hinder part of the head'.

magnificence about this pompous counsellor. At any rate his fellow-countrymen are not called 'Danes' but 'Danskens', citizens of Gdańsk, the well known Polish harbour. Of course 'Danskens' might also be a borrowed Danish form of 'Dane'. And so it is generally translated even by the best informed translators, Pasternak, Tarnawski and Śládek among them. One might argue that if Shakespeare made use of the native 'Polak' why should he not use here the Danish form? There can be little doubt, however, that Gdańsk people are meant here. In this I rely on the highest Danish authority, the late Professor Otto Jespersen, surely one of the most distinguished English scholars of our century. 'Danske' was the common English spelling of the name of the Polish city—we find it also in Webster—and 'Danskens' is its regular derivative. Witold Chwalewik, the latest of the fifteen Polish translators of *Hamlet*, has expressed the opinion that Polonius' son Laertes is an embodiment of the qualities which western observers held to be typical of a young Polish nobleman in those days.¹⁸ Moreover, he is to be elected king by the people, Polish-fashion (IV, v).

IV

And now for Bohemia, the only Slavonic country which has the privilege of being the scene of a Shakespeare play. However, while relations between the Poles and the Scandinavians in *Hamlet* are historical and the author could have looked them up in some Latin chronicle (e.g. *Saxo Grammaticus*), the Bohemia of *The Winter's Tale* with its desert sea coast is a purely romantic creation. Instead of delving in Bohemia's legendary history and dramatising the story of Libussa, Vlasta or St Wenceslas Shakespeare chose to make the country the scene of his most enchanting pastoral, entirely disregarding the traditional claim of Theocritus' Sicily which his source, R. Greene, duly respected. Shakespeare's Bohemian farm folk are not the conventional pseudo-classical shepherds and shepherdesses, but genuine rustics. The late J. Vodák, Prague's leading Shakespeare critic, was especially impressed with the admirable vignette of the old shepherd's wife (IV, iii). He saw in it a faithful portrayal of a warm-hearted, hospitable Bohemian country woman. But the type is doubtless universal and the poet could have found it at a sheep-shearing feast in his own native Warwickshire. As for the gay pedlar Autolycus, he is taken from Ovid and bears an unmistakable family likeness to the Elizabethan rogues described by Greene elsewhere.

¹⁸ He writes (*Polska w Hamlecie*, Wrocław, 1956, p. 92): 'Drawing information from Botero Shakespeare was bound to know that Gdańsk was actually Polish.' Giovanni Botero's *The World of Kingdoms and Commonwealths* as well as another contemporary book of reference *The Theatre of the Earth* appeared in London in 1601. The latter calls Gdańsk 'a famous mart town in Polonia'. Botero is not so clear about it.

Richard von Kralik, the fanciful Viennese Shakespearian, would have it that Shakespeare must have visited Bohemia. We might as well assume that the bear in the play is the dramatist's reminiscence from the Bohemian forests which at that time were still haunted by them, or that his last two sonnets refer to the hot springs of Carlsbad. Still, there may have been some good reason why Shakespeare made certain changes in Greene's story rather in Bohemia's favour. It is not hard to guess why he departed from Greene in making the king of Sicily a prey to insane jealousy. Fierce jealousy was regarded as primarily an Italian, especially Sicilian passion, hence the transposition. Florizel's love for sweet Perdita recalls the democratic Bohemian Prince Oldřich who married Božena, a farmer's daughter. The poet may have read about the misalliance in Belleforest. The story is old. There is in Trinity College library at Cambridge a precious manuscript of the first Bohemian rhymed chronicle from the first half of the 14th century—earlier than Barbour's *Bruce*—where the details of the story are given and the reasons for the prince's preference of a Czech peasant girl to a German princess are quoted with evident approval.¹⁹ The manuscript may have been brought to England by Anne of Bohemia, Richard II's beloved first wife. It is interesting to note that Greene's jealousy story has been traced to an event that took place during the reign of her father, Charles IV, and is recorded in a Silesian chronicle.

Two problems have troubled Shakespearian scholars: Bohemia's coastline and her association with Sicily. Shakespeare found both in Greene's *Pandosto*. The sea shore is not such a blunder as Ben Jonson or Uncle Toby thought. It was hard for an Englishman to imagine a powerful European kingdom without any access to the sea. Besides, the dominions of the Habsburg kings of Bohemia did stretch to the Adriatic. This Shakespeare could have known,²⁰ though he was no doubt unaware of the fact that King Otakar—Dante's valiant Ottachero (*Purgatorio*, Canto VII)—had a foothold on the sea shore (at Pordenone) and that the same applied to his son Wenceslas II who was also king of Poland. As for Sicily, I should like to point out that this is not the only case when Bohemia was

¹⁹ It was love at first sight while the beautiful Božena was washing family linen. The chronicle makes it quite clear that she was a simple peasant girl (*sedlka*), not a laundress of high birth like Nausicaa. Their offspring was Bracislaus (Břetislav), Achilles Bohemicus, whose name is perpetuated in Bratislava. For the story see Count Lützow's *Bohemia*, London, 1896, pp. 26 and 37; also his *History of Bohemian Literature*, London, 1899, and *Lectures on the Historians of Bohemia*, London, 1905.

²⁰ L. Kellner in *Shakespeare* (Vienna, 1900, p. 168) asserts that Marcus Landau has proved ('nachweist') that the dramatist was in touch with Dr Dee after the latter returned from Bohemia. According to Kellner Prospero was modelled on Rudolf II. The eccentric emperor also neglected his duties, being rapt in secret studies, and was also ousted by his brother. Although his displacement by the Archduke Matthias took place at a later date, 1608 in Moravia and 1611 in Bohemia, it still happened in time for *The Tempest*.

coupled with that kingdom. In one of Shakespeare's apocrypha, *Edward III* (published in 1596) at the beginning of Act III, King John of France enumerates his allies as follows: 'Some friends have we, beside domestic power; the stern Polonian, and the warlike Dane, the king of Bohemia, and of Sicily, are all become confederate with us'. The monarch in question is John, the blind king of Bohemia, who being married to a French princess took part in the battle of Crécy on the French side. His heroic death and Edward's sorrow provided Froissart with a touching scene of true chivalry.

There is one link between Bohemia and Sicily which has, I believe, so far been overlooked in this connection. One of the most important state documents of the Prague Record Office is the Golden Bull of Sicily which made Bohemia a hereditary kingdom. The Bull bears the golden seal of the kingdom of Sicily, hence its name. It was issued in 1212 by Emperor Frederick II. Frederick resided in Sicily, which he preferred to Germany. Thus this heretic monarch who was known as 'the wonder of the world' elevated Bohemia above all German states of the Empire. Various theories have been advanced to solve this geographical puzzle. My late friend Antonín Fenc, a scholarly Prague Shakespearian actor-manager, favoured another approach to this problem. He believed Sicily was confused by Greene with a Slavonic people called Sysyle by King Alfred in his description of the seats of the Wends which is interpolated in his version of Orosius.²¹ In that case the sea would be the Baltic, on whose shore King Otakar II founded the fortress of Königsberg (now re-named Kaliningrad) in 1255.

The Czechs have always been proud of Shakespeare's romantic picture of their country. *The Winter's Tale* is full of anachronisms and Kvapil in his remarkable productions did not hesitate to add to them. In spite of Apollo, he set the play at Prague Castle and St Vitus Cathedral. The palace walls were decorated with the double-tailed silver lions of Bohemia on a red background. Polixenes looked like George of Poděbrad, and a typical central Bohemian landscape with the sacred mountain of Říp in the background was peopled with rustics in Czech peasant costumes.

As we have seen, with the sole exception of Queen Hermione, who is Russian by birth, only counterfeit Russians appear in Shakespeare. As for the Poles, all depends on a favourable acceptance of the Polonius hypothesis. Bohemians, however, are well represented and the only Slav city mentioned is Prague. Feste in *Twelfth Night* quotes 'the old hermit of Prague'. We cannot of course take his fooling seriously, but it may have some historical background. There were

²¹ According to L. Niederle a *pagus* of that name is found north of Leipzig; another was near Lübeck, one of the 'Wendish Cities'.

two famous hermits in the vicinity of Prague in the Middle Ages: St Ivan, living among the rocks near Beroun in the 9th century, and St Prokop in the 11th century, whose name is associated with the Sázava monastery, the last refuge of the Slavonic rite in Bohemia.²² The old Bohemian Procopius legend is preserved and has been retold by Vrchlický in one of his finest poems.

V

The Winter's Tale is a dramatised romance with an improbable dénouement. The Bohemian king and his son are fairy-tale figures, though the simple people, as is usually the case in Shakespeare, are real enough. In *Measure for Measure*, however, the play which seems to have fascinated Pushkin, there is a life-like character of a Bohemian which deserves some attention. The main story turns on sex. Barnardine is merely the hero of a grimly farcical jail episode who does not speak more than some dozen lines. Nevertheless the character sketch is admirably conceived and stands out with great clarity owing to the sidelights thrown on it by Barnardine's critics. He has of course nothing to do with the Cistercian order whose name he bears. But it has to be stressed that neither is he a gypsy (cikán), as Czech translators assume, willingly misled, perhaps, by the authority of A. W. Schlegel. It would be only human if they did not care to acknowledge kinship with such a disreputable character. However, we have to face the fact that for the Elizabethans 'Bohemian' did not stand for gypsy, but for 'Hussite'. The word did not lose caste in England until much later. The French misnomer, due probably to anti-Hussite propaganda, did not find favour there.²³ As Sir Osbert Sitwell once pointed out, the historical name was brought into discredit by a German Parisian: by Murger's *Scènes de la vie de Bohème*, a story about the unconventional life of students and artists in Paris. It was Thackeray who introduced the secondary debased meaning of 'anarchic bohemianism' to England. Barnardine may have been a Bohemian in this modern sense too. But a gypsy could not have been addressed as Sir. And we are told that Barnardine had some influential friends who 'wrought reprieves for him'. Besides, beheading was a means of execution reserved for gentlemen.²⁴ As for his offence, it is too casually mentioned to be taken over-seriously. Neither the Duke nor Shakespeare was likely to pardon a

²² Cf. Z. R. Dittrich, 'The Beginning of Christianisation in Great Moravia' (*The Slavonic and East European Review*, XXXIX, 92, 1960, p. 164.)

²³ Nevertheless, it may occur exceptionally in the sense of 'gypsy' in Scott and Byron and in some comic opera.

²⁴ Barnardine's beheading had been decided upon before Angelo's instructions concerning Claudio's decapitated head arrived. This alone is a sure indication of his social status. Common thieves and murderers were hanged.

common murderer. In Professor W. Raleigh's opinion, Barnardine 'so endears himself to his maker that his execution is felt to be impossible'. Barnardine's Bohemian descent should be taken literally: he is 'a Bohemian born', i.e. a native of Bohemia, 'nursed up and bred' in Vienna where, we hear, 'corruption boils and bubbles'. I am a Bohemian born myself and I do not hesitate to recognise the type.

Barnardine invites comparison with Josef Švejk, or rather he is a Švejk and *furiant* rolled into one, and I own to a sneaking affection for the fellow. Hašek's good soldier Švejk would seem to be a type produced by the instinct of self-preservation in a small democratic people, placed in an awkward geographical position and repeatedly subjected in its chequered history to arbitrary tyranny. The helpless have their own resources. Švejk's personality represents the self-protective posture of a man who is sustained in desperate situations only by his satirical humour finding an outlet in witty parody and droll anecdote. As a comic character he has been compared by the late Professor Tillyard to Falstaff. What links him to Barnardine is his attitude toward powers that be which makes all authorities, spiritual or temporal, look like fools. But Barnardine has other characteristics too. He is courageous in comparison with the panic-stricken Claudio and something of a sceptic. Friar Peter has little chance of converting him. In some respects he has more in common with the Bohemian *furiant*, national type of a proud, defiant and obstinate man. (*Furiant* does not mean 'furious'—*furioso*—but denotes rather an arrogant, challenging person.) There is something of a dare-devil in him, unyielding and unmanageable. The term, by the way, is familiar as the name of a fiery and impulsive Czech dance introduced to England by Dvořák. This rural character is quite frequent in our literature, e.g. the hot-headed farmer Lukáš in Karolína Světlá's story which provided the libretto for Smetana's opera 'The Kiss' favoured by E. M. Forster. One of our best peasant comedies (by Stroupežnický) is called *Naši furianti*, which might be translated 'Our Diehards'. The *furiant* is, on the whole, a comedy type, while its cruel Russian counterpart, *samodur*, as we see it in Janáček's opera 'The Storm', based on Ostrovsky's play, belongs to tragedy. Barnardine will not consent to die 'for any man's persuasion'. He might stand as a grotesque symbol of his hard-pressed people in their desperate struggle for survival.

Shakespeare's Bohemian jailbird, 'a stubborn soul', though only a minor character, is a remarkable achievement. He seems to outgrow the purpose for which he was originally designed by his creator. His character has caused perplexity. But critics have been too hard on him. It does not mean much that he was called 'rude wretch' by

the duke. He was not sober. He had been drinking hard perhaps to drown his sorrows as the Russians used to do, out of despair (*s gorya*). We should not forget in passing judgment on his character that he is taken at a disadvantage. He is certainly *not* a common thief or another Bill Sikes, not even a 'Bohemian Tartar', whatever that may mean.²⁵ Dr M. C. Bradbrook called him a portent.²⁶ It looks as if Shakespeare's prophetic soul had some vague, uncanny precognition of what was in the womb of time. Five years after his death the unequal struggle against Habsburg intolerance brought the flower of the Bohemian nation into jail and on to the scaffold. One of those noble victims is of particular interest to students of the Shakespearian stage: Zdeněk Brtnický of Waldstein.²⁷ He is doubtless the only Slav to have seen and described it.

²⁵ Among the picturesque nicknames and opprobrious epithets bandied about by Pistol and mine host of the Garter in *Merry Wives of Windsor* we find besides 'base Hungarian wight' and 'Phrygian Turk', also 'Bohemian Tartar'. It is applied by the facetious host to the innocent Simple. 'Turk' and 'Tartar' were common terms of abuse but the combination is unusual. 'Tartar' suggested a tramp, a strolling vagabond, but the adjective makes less sense here than 'Phrygian' because the Turks after all did occupy ancient Phrygia. The Tartars never reached Bohemia. They overran Poland, dominated Russia, destroyed Hungary and ravaged even Moravia but were stopped at the Bohemian mountain barriers by King Wenceslas I.

²⁶ In her stimulating article, 'Authority, Truth and Justice in *Measure for Measure*' (*Review of English Studies*, London, October 1941). On Barnardine's crime, mentioned in a doubtful tag, cf. Mary Lascelles, *Shakespeare's Measure for Measure*, London, 1953, pp. 112-3 and 129.

²⁷ See 'A Moravian Nobleman on the Bankside in 1600' by the present writer, summarised in *Report of the Eleventh International Shakespeare Conference*, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1964. The leading authority on Anglo-Bohemian contacts in the past, Professor O. Odložilík, of the University of Pennsylvania, has written on Brtnický in *Časopis Matice Moravské*, 59, Brno, 1935, pp. 281-9. Cf. Josef Polišenský in *Philologica Pragensia*, VII, 4, Prague, 1964, pp. 371-2.